MARJORIE LIU
SANA TAKEDA
MONSTRESS™
ISSUE 13
image

THE MONSTRESS STORY SO FAR...

On the Isle of Bones, Maika finally learned a key detail about her mysterious past: her mother, Moriko, deliberately conceived Maika with the last living descendant of the Shaman-Empress so that Maika could inherit the Shaman-Empress's power – and the Monstrum that now lives beneath her skin.

But the price of that information was high. After barely escaping the island with her life, Maika was nearly apprehended by authorities from the maritime city of Thyria. Angry and famished, Maika's Monstrum, Zinn, struck back, devouring every living soul aboard the Thyrian ship.

In the aftermath, Maika's allies, a smuggling crew working for the Brothers Imura, took Maika on board, though they feared the certain wrath of the Thyrian Blood Queens. Overwhelmed by guilt, regret, and despair, Maika made the rash decision to touch her fragment of an ancient and powerful mask to her face – and set off a ripple effect of mystical activation that could change everything.

THE PLAYERS...

MAIKA An Arcanic teen who survived the Great War, and slavery at the hands of the Cumaean witch nuns. Ruthless and haunted, she is determined to uncover the truth behind her mother's murder — and her mother's secrets — in the hope that she can free herself from an ancient and dangerous god called a Monstrum that is imprisoned inside her body and fills her with an otherworldly hunger for human flesh. In her current possession are two clues to her past: a photograph, and a fragment of a mask that many would kill to possess.

ZINN A mysterious, primordial Monstrum of tremendous power that shares Maika's body and mind, and fights her for control. Once considered a god, and drawn into this world by the Shaman-Empress, this Monstrum is driven by a deadly hunger, consuming the lives of humans and Arcanics alike, leaving only their desiccated corpses behind. Though it may give the impression that its only wish is to survive, there's far more to this creature, and its desires, than meets the eye…

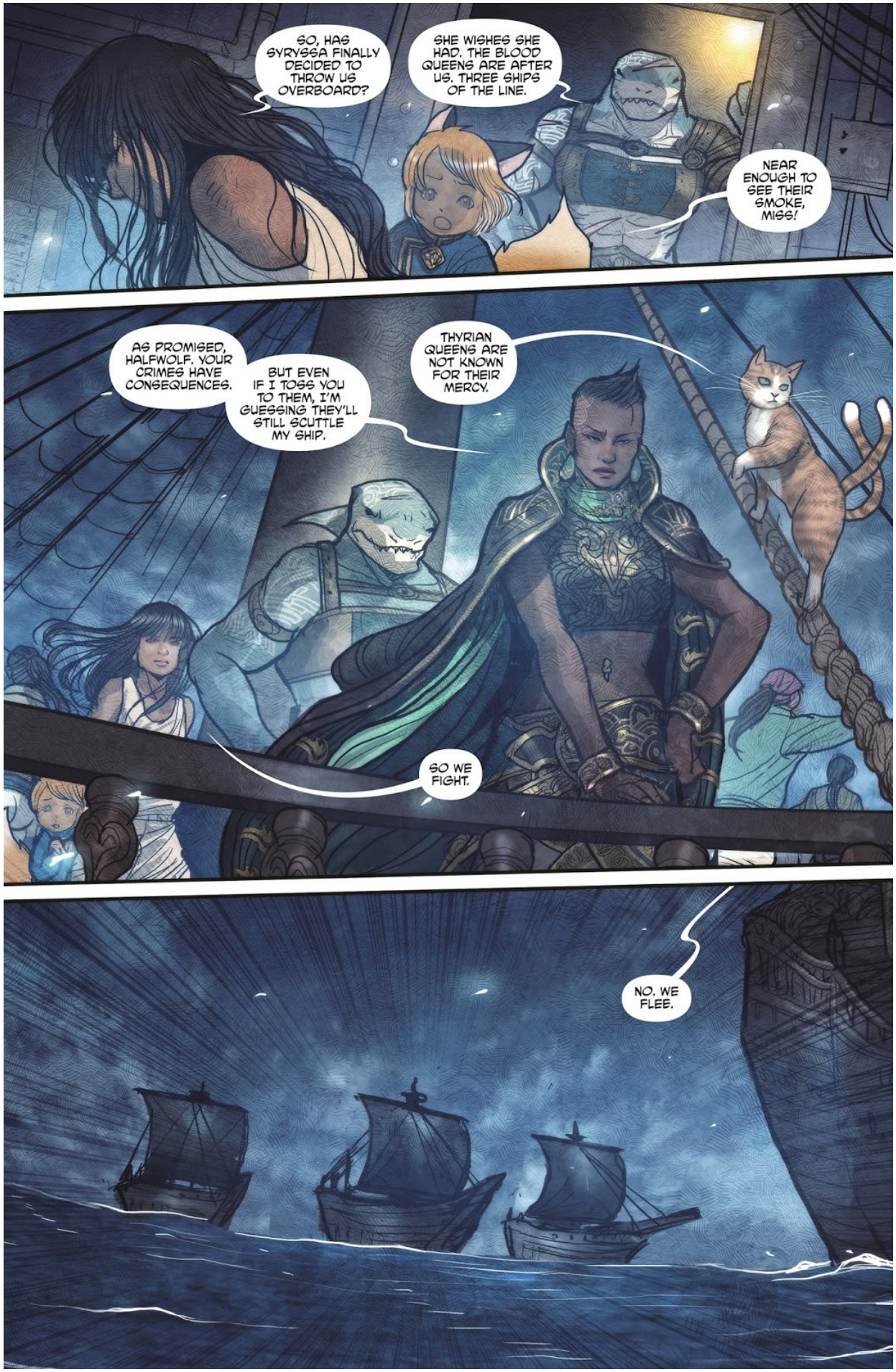
REN An enigmatic nekomancer cat with mysterious motives, he is one of Maika's companions on her journey, and perhaps an agent of the Dusk Court — or some greater power.

KIPPA An Arcanic fox girl saved from slavery by Maika. Innocent and optimistic, she is frightened by the Monstrum — but trusts Maika and will bravely defend her and others by rushing into battles too dangerous for a child.

TUYA Maika's closest friend in the world, who has been with her since before the Battle of Constantine. Unbeknownst to Maika, she is also the Baroness of the Last Dusk, a high-level member of the Arcanic Dusk Court tasked with containing – or even destroying – Maika's power.

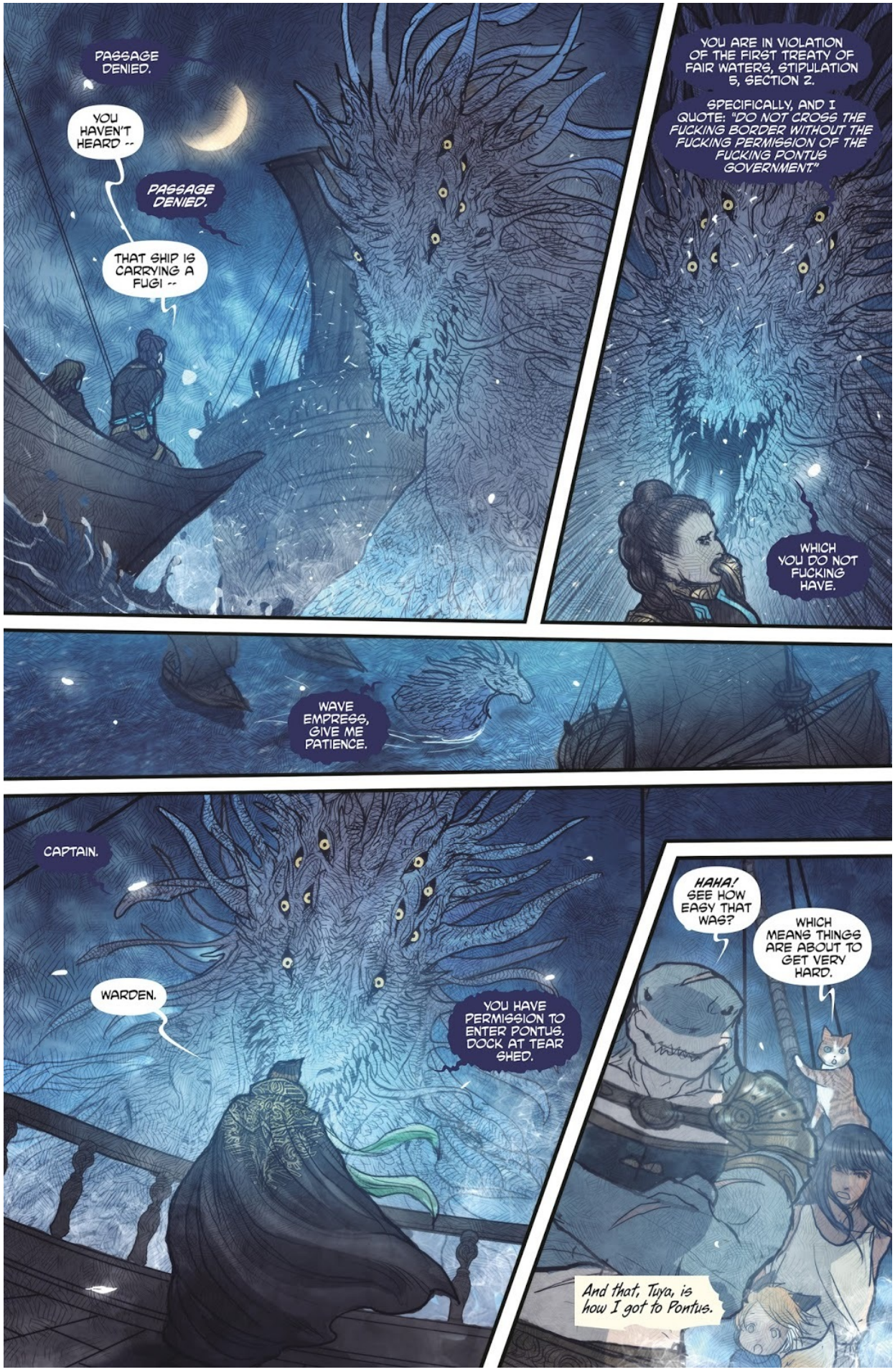
MAIKA.
SHUT UP, TUYA.

I HAVE SOME THINGS TO TELL YOU. AND YOU'RE GOING TO LISTEN.
LATER.
PLEASE.
NOT NOW.
YOU'LL REGRET THIS.
I... NEVER... HAVE... BEFORE...
PRETENDING NOT TO HEAR ME... IS WHAT GOT YOU INTO TROUBLE... IN THE FIRST PLACE.
NOW IT'S TOO LATE.
WHAT... DO YOU MEAN?
TUYA...
TUYA...
MISS, WAKE UP! WE'RE IN TROUBLE!


SO, HAS SYRYSSA FINALLY DECIDED TO THROW US OVERBOARD?
SHE WISHES SHE HAD. THE BLOOD QUEENS ARE AFTER US. THREE SHIPS OF THE LINE.
NEAR ENOUGH TO SEE THEIR SMOKE, MISS!
AS PROMISED, HALFWOLF. YOUR CRIMES HAVE CONSEQUENCES.
BUT EVEN IF I TOSS YOU TO THEM, I'M GUESSING THEY'LL STILL SCUTTLE MY SHIP.
THYRIAN QUEENS ARE NOT KNOWN FOR THEIR MERCY.
SO WE FIGHT.
NO. WE FLEE.

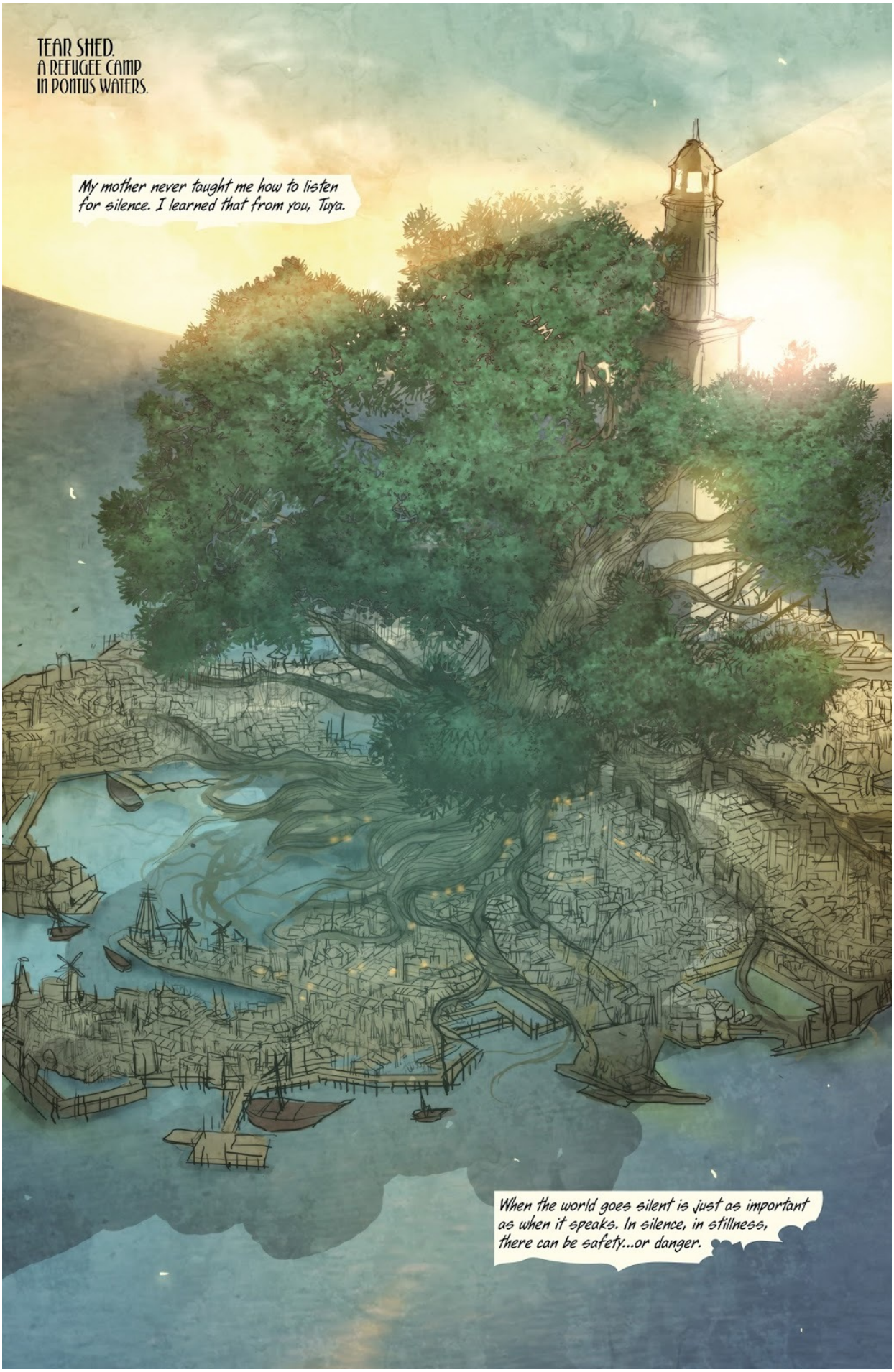
WHAT'S MISS OLD TOOTH DOING?
BUYING US TIME.
OLD TOOTH IS THE DAUGHTER OF AN ANCIENT. BLESSED BY THE WAVE EMPRESS HERSELF.
SHE KNOWS THE SEA CODES BETTER THAN ANYONE ALIVE. AND WE'RE EXPECTED.
"BROOOOOOOT..."
"BROOOOOOOT..."

THE BORDER WARDEN IS COMING.
HALT!
FFROOSHHH

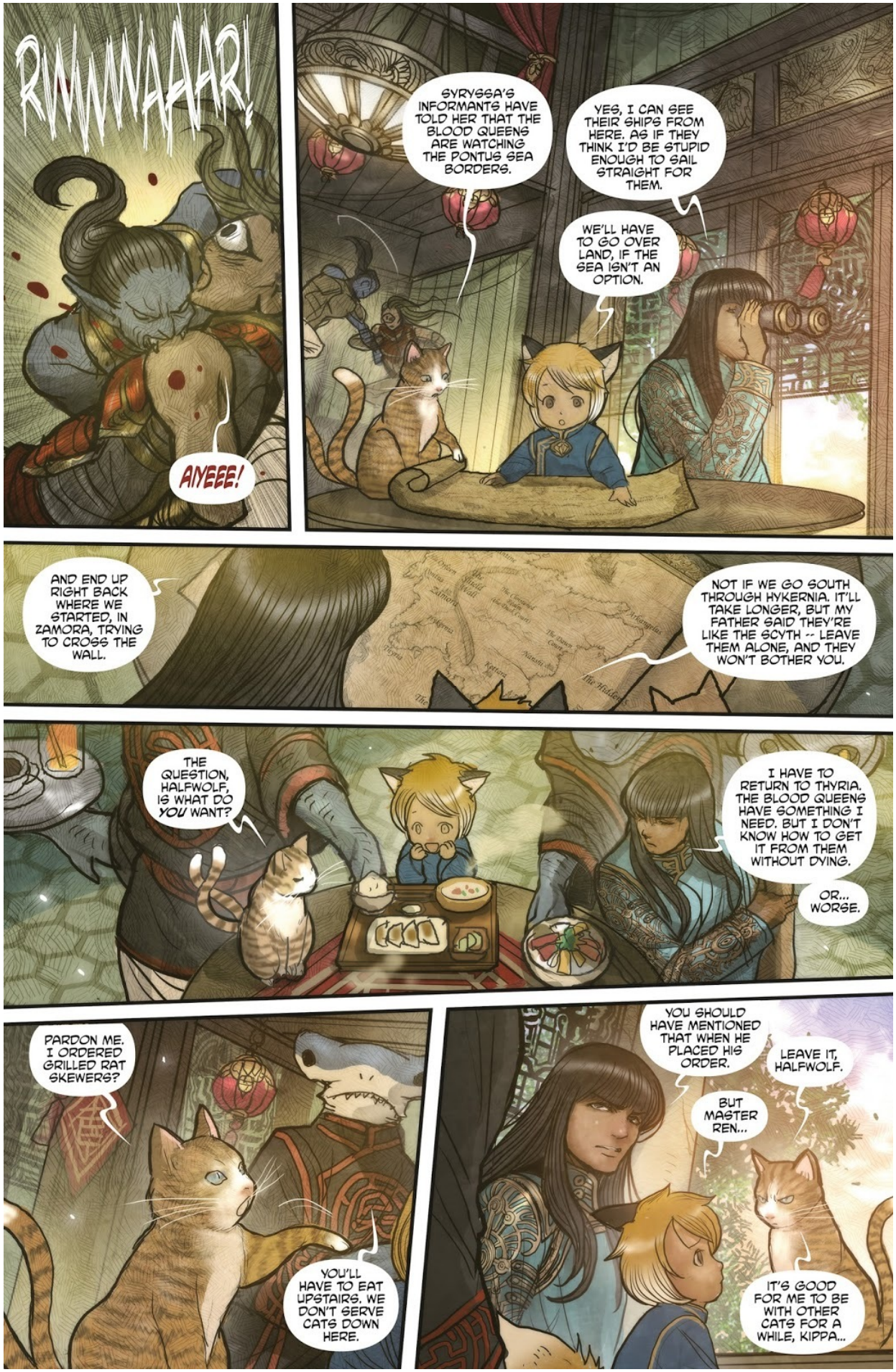

PASSAGE DENIED.
YOU HAVEN'T HEARD --
PASSAGE DENIED.
THAT SHIP IS CARRYING A FUGI --
YOU ARE IN VIOLATION OF THE FIRST TREATY OF FAIR WATERS, STIPULATION 5, SECTION 2.
SPECIFICALLY, AND I QUOTE: "DO NOT CROSS THE FUCKING BORDER WITHOUT THE FUCKING PERMISSION OF THE FUCKING PONTUS GOVERNMENT."
WHICH YOU DO NOT FUCKING HAVE.
WAVE EMPRESS, GIVE ME PATIENCE.
CAPTAIN.
WARDEN.
YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO ENTER PONTUS. DOCK AT TEAR SHED.
HAHA! SEE HOW EASY THAT WAS?
WHICH MEANS THINGS ARE ABOUT TO GET VERY HARD.
And that, Tuya, is how I got to Pontus.

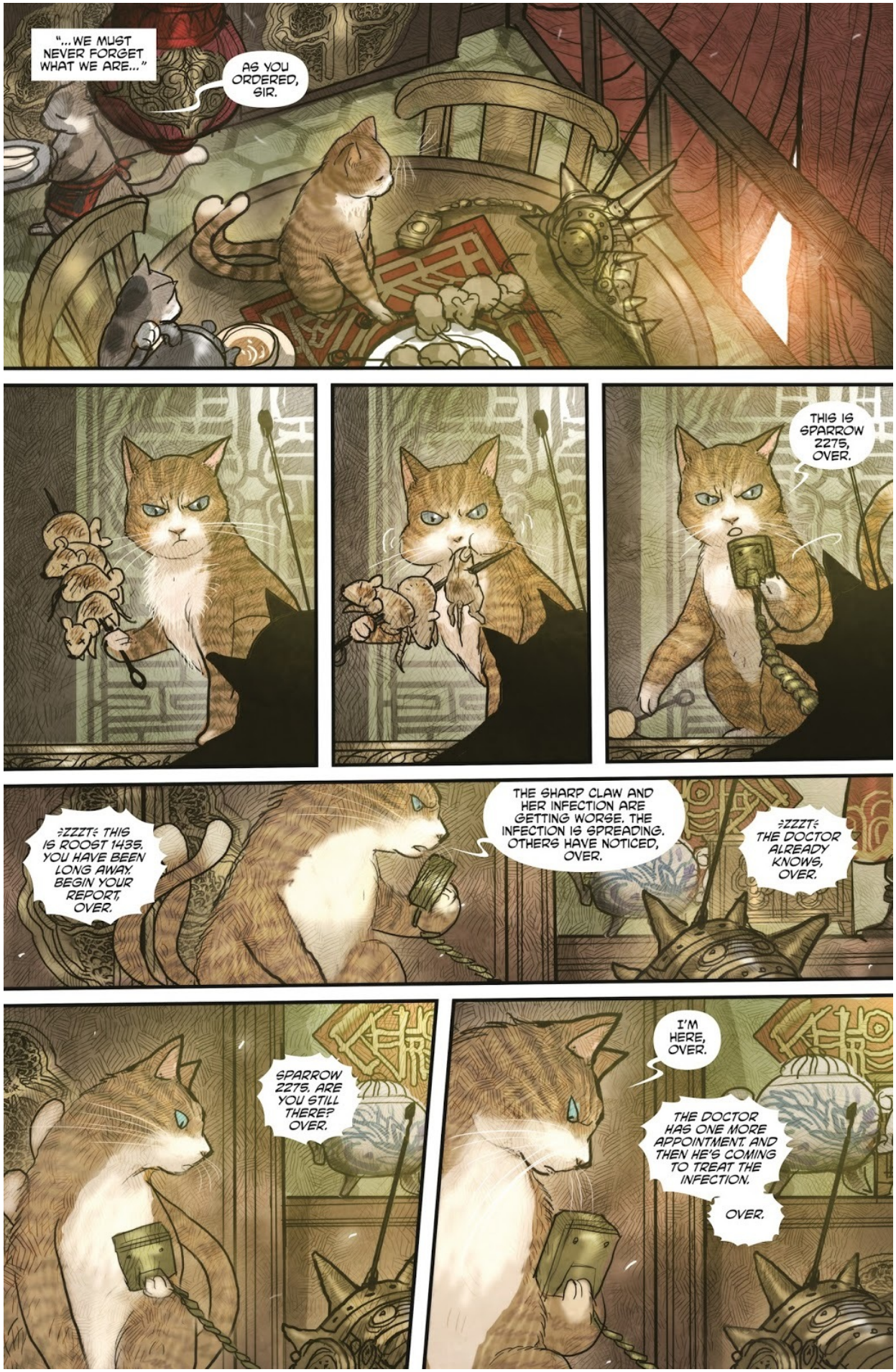
DAWN COURT
I'M TOLD OUR FLEET IS HIDDEN IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS ACROSS THE KAGURA MOUNTAINS... TO MAKE IT A HARDER TARGET FOR THE FEDERATION, AND ITS SPIES.
YOUR SHIPS ARE MORE ADVANCED, I'VE HEARD, THAN WHAT THE FEDERATION IS CURRENTLY BUILDING.
I WOULDN'T KNOW, BARONESS. I PAY LITTLE ATTENTION TO SUCH THINGS. MODERN WARFARE IS SO INELEGANT AND... BRUTISH.
BUT AS MY DAUGHTER REMINDS ME, I'M OLD-FASHIONED. THE LAST TIME I WENT INTO BATTLE IT WAS WITH MY SWORD AND CLAWS.
I KNOW THAT BATTLE. THE CONQUERING OF MAD BAROU IS LORE.
WHAT YOU CALL LORE WAS NOTHING BUT A TRIFLING BORE.
THE BATTLES THAT TRULY MATTER ARE NOT THE ONES ANYONE EVER TELLS TALES OF.
I SEE.
I THOUGHT WE WERE SUPPOSED TO BEGIN NEGOTIATIONS WITH THE WARLORD PRESENT?
I'VE BEEN HERE FOR WEEKS AND HAVE BARELY SEEN HER.
SHE WILL BE HERE SOON.
BUT I WANTED TO SPEAK TO YOU FIRST.
ABOUT WHAT, MY LADY?

MAIKA HALFWOLF.
MY GRANDDAUGHTER.
I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER HAD THE PLEASURE.
THAT IS THE FIRST LIE I WILL PERMIT YOU, BARONESS.
THE SECOND WILL HAVE A PRICE.
THE THIRD... WELL, WE'LL BE BEYOND PENALTIES AT THAT POINT.
A FAITHLESS FRIEND IS INDICATIVE OF A CATASTROPHIC LACK OF CHARACTER... AND REFLECTS POORLY ON THE DUSK COURT AND OUR NEGOTIATION.
AND WHAT DOES A FAITHLESS GRANDMOTHER REFLECT?
I PROTECTED MAIKA FOR *YEARS.* WHAT, PRECISELY, DID YOU DO?
YOU CANNOT FATHOM THE LENGTHS I WENT TO KEEP --
OH, SHUT UP.
IF YOU CARED, YOU WOULD HAVE TORN APART THE KNOWN WORLD, DEFIED EVERYONE, TO FIND HER.
YOU WOULD HAVE LIFTED HER FROM THE FUCKING ASHES THAT WE CLAWED OUT OF AFTER THE WAR WHEN WE WERE STARVING AND ALONE.
SAVE YOUR YAPPING FOR YOUR UNDERLINGS...
...AND LET'S DO WHAT WE BOTH KNOW MUST BE DONE.


TEAR SHED.
A REFUGEE CAMP
IN PONTUS WATERS.
My mother never taught me how to listen for silence. I learned that from you, Tuya.
When the world goes silent is just as important as when it speaks. In silence, in stillness, there can be safety...or danger.

The monster has been silent for two full weeks since it fed on the crew of the Blood Queens' vessel.
It requires sleep after it feeds. The bigger the meal, the longer the sleep.
But its silences are growing shorter.
Soon, I fear, there will be no sleep at all.
Only the hunger.
NO ONE HAS EVER BEATEN THE VERGE.
WHO SAYS SHE'LL BE BEAT TONIGHT?
BUT LOOK AT THAT GIRL! AND ONLY ONE ARM?
GODDESS, SHE'S A BEAST.


RIWWWAAAR!
AIYEEE!
SYRYSSA'S INFORMANTS HAVE TOLD HER THAT THE BLOOD QUEENS ARE WATCHING THE PONTUS SEA BORDERS.
YES, I CAN SEE THEIR SHIPS FROM HERE. AS IF THEY THINK I'D BE STUPID ENOUGH TO SAIL STRAIGHT FOR THEM.
WE'LL HAVE TO GO OVER LAND, IF THE SEA ISN'T AN OPTION.
AND END UP RIGHT BACK WHERE WE STARTED, IN ZAMORA, TRYING TO CROSS THE WALL.
NOT IF WE GO SOUTH THROUGH HYKERNIA. IT'LL TAKE LONGER, BUT MY FATHER SAID THEY'RE LIKE THE SCYTH -- LEAVE THEM ALONE, AND THEY WON'T BOTHER YOU.
THE QUESTION, HALFWOLF, IS WHAT DO *YOU* WANT?
I HAVE TO RETURN TO THYRIA. THE BLOOD QUEENS HAVE SOMETHING I NEED. BUT I DON'T KNOW HOW TO GET IT FROM THEM WITHOUT DYING.
OR... WORSE.
PARDON ME. I ORDERED GRILLED RAT SKEWERS?
YOU'LL HAVE TO EAT UPSTAIRS. WE DON'T SERVE CATS DOWN HERE.
YOU SHOULD HAVE MENTIONED THAT WHEN HE PLACED HIS ORDER.
LEAVE IT, HALFWOLF.
BUT MASTER REN...
IT'S GOOD FOR ME TO BE WITH OTHER CATS FOR A WHILE, KIPPA...


"...WE MUST NEVER FORGET WHAT WE ARE..."
AS YOU ORDERED, SIR.
THIS IS SPARROW 2275, OVER.
÷ZZZT÷ THIS IS ROOST 1435. YOU HAVE BEEN LONG AWAY. BEGIN YOUR REPORT, OVER.
THE SHARP CLAW AND HER INFECTION ARE GETTING WORSE. THE INFECTION IS SPREADING. OTHERS HAVE NOTICED, OVER.
÷ZZZT÷ THE DOCTOR ALREADY KNOWS, OVER.
SPARROW 2275. ARE YOU STILL THERE? OVER.
I'M HERE, OVER.
THE DOCTOR HAS ONE MORE APPOINTMENT. AND THEN HE'S COMING TO TREAT THE INFECTION.
OVER.

OLD TOOTH SAID THE JOLLY RAVAGER WILL STAY IN PONTUS WATERS UNTIL MISTER SEIZI TELLS THEM IT'S SAFE TO COME HOME. SHE SAID IT MIGHT BE NEVER.
YOU SHOULD TALK TO CAPTAIN SVRYGSA, MISS. THANK HER FOR EVERYTHING SHE DID TO HELP US.
THANK HER FOR FOLLOWING ORDERS?
I'D RATHER SPEND MY TIME FINDING A WAY FOR US TO GET OUT OF THIS REFUGEE CAMP. IT FEELS TOO MUCH LIKE...
...PLACES I'VE BEEN BEFORE.
MISS! THAT'S MINE!
NO!
IF YOU'RE GOING TO FIGHT ME, LITTLE FOX, WE SHOULD WORK ON YOUR STRENGTH.
A MESSAGE FROM A FRIEND. HE'S WAITING AT THE POETS' CAFÉ FOR YOU. DOWN AT SEA LEVEL, OFF LIGHTHOUSE ROAD.
I DON'T HAVE ANY --
MISS?
FINISH YOUR DUMPLINGS.

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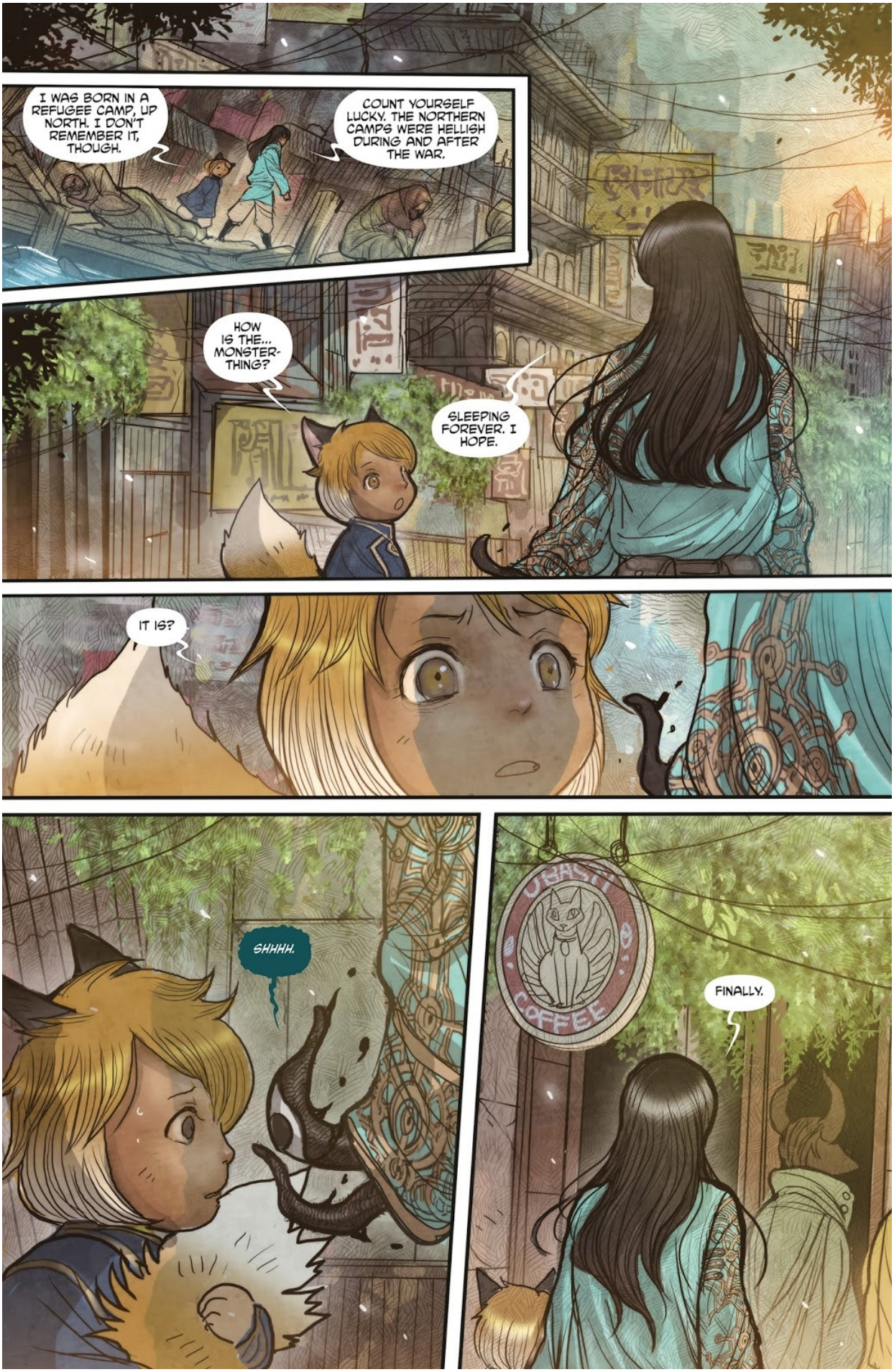
I WAS BORN IN A REFUGEE CAMP, UP NORTH. I DON'T REMEMBER IT, THOUGH.
COUNT YOURSELF LUCKY. THE NORTHERN CAMPS WERE HELLISH DURING AND AFTER THE WAR.
HOW IS THE... MONSTER-THING?
SLEEPING FOREVER. I HOPE.
IT IS?
SHHHH.
COFFEE
FINALLY.

:GASP:
CORVIN, YOU FUCKER. I'M SURPRISED YOU'RE NOT DEAD.
GOOD EVENING TO YOU, TOO, LADY HALFWOLF.
COME, SIT. IT'S BEEN TOO LONG.
AND WE HAVE VERY LITTLE TIME TO DISCUSS HOW WE'RE GOING TO SAVE YOUR LIFE.
AGAIN.
YAY!

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN WE WERE CHILDREN, RESAK... HOW YOU USED TO LOVE RIDING THE TRAIN?
MMM. WHAT I REMEMBER IS HOW CAREFULLY I HAD TO HIDE MYSELF SO NO ONE NOTICED I WASN'T HUMAN. BUT THAT WAS JUST TO AVOID STARES.
THE STAKES ARE A BIT HIGHER NOW.
DO YOU THINK ANY OF THIS WILL MATTER IN THE END?
MAYBE NOT. BUT I'D RATHER DIE SAVING LIVES THAN DISSECTING THEM.
HURRY.

MAKE YOURSELVES COMFORTABLE. THE PRIME MINISTER WILL BE WITH YOU IN A MOMENT.
AFTER THE MASSACRE OF ZAMORA, THE DEMONS RAVAGE DEFENSELESS FEDERATION SETTLERS!
THE MOTHER SUPERIOR REPELS SNEAK ATTACK, WOUNDED BUT UNDEFEATED.
SHADOW OF WAR FALLS UPON HUMANKIND ONCE MORE.
THE ONLY THING THAT TRAVELS FASTER THAN RUMORS IS LIES.
THE BITCH OUTSMARTED US.
YOUR EXCELLENCY.
LADY ATENA... RESAK. IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU BOTH AGAIN. YOU'VE MET ADMIRAL BRITO BEFORE, YES?
YEARS AGO, DURING THE HOLIDAYS.
I WAS AWAY AT UNIVERSITY. BUT IT'S A PLEASURE, ADMIRAL.

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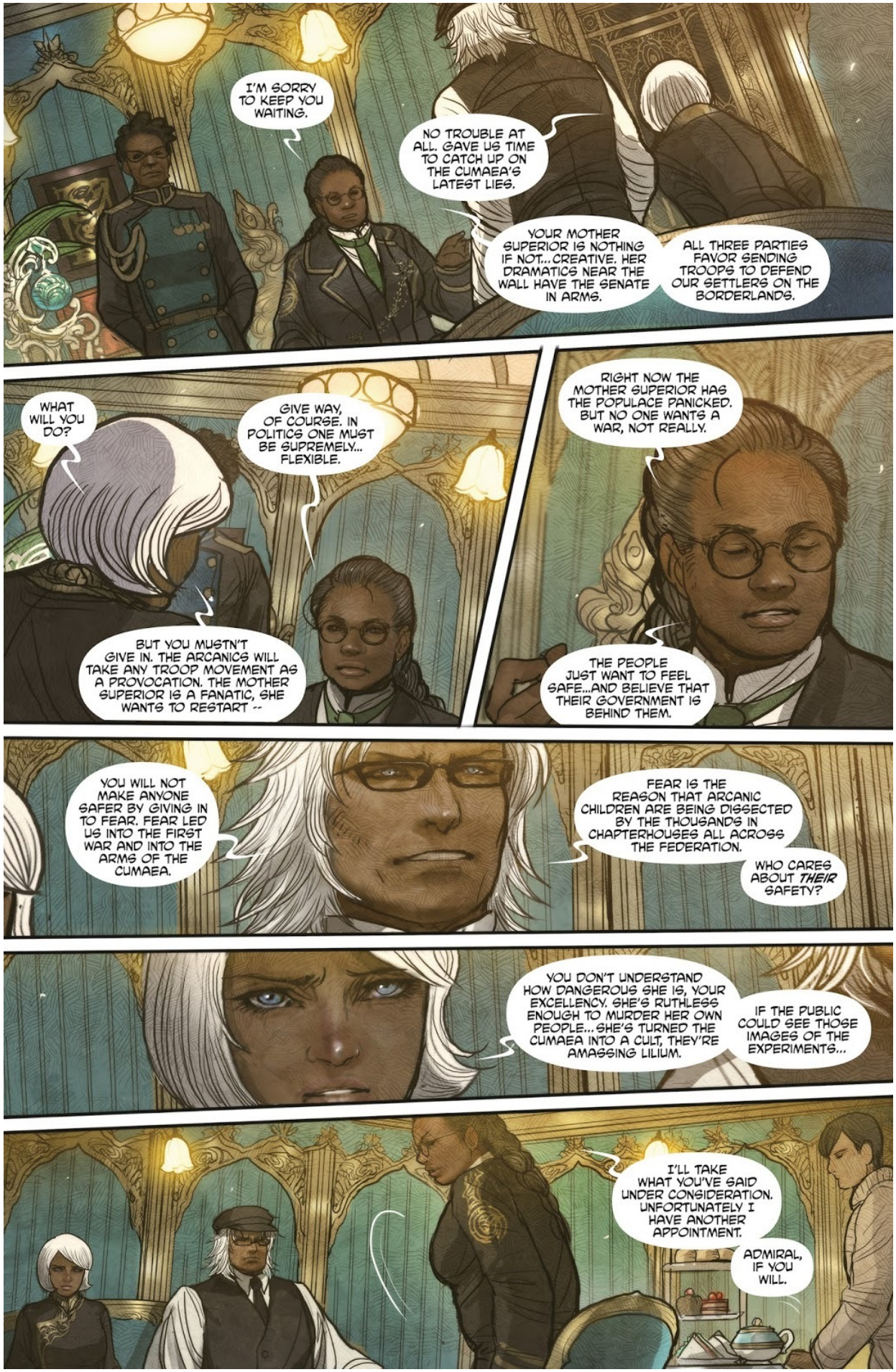
I'M SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAITING.
NO TROUBLE AT ALL. GAVE US TIME TO CATCH UP ON THE CUMAEA'S LATEST LIES.
YOUR MOTHER SUPERIOR IS NOTHING IF NOT... CREATIVE. HER DRAMATICS NEAR THE WALL HAVE THE SENATE IN ARMS.
ALL THREE PARTIES FAVOR SENDING TROOPS TO DEFEND OUR SETTLERS ON THE BORDERLANDS.
WHAT WILL YOU DO?
GIVE WAY, OF COURSE. IN POLITICS ONE MUST BE SUPREMELY... FLEXIBLE.
BUT YOU MUSTN'T GIVE IN. THE ARCANICS WILL TAKE ANY TROOP MOVEMENT AS A PROVOCATION. THE MOTHER SUPERIOR IS A FANATIC, SHE WANTS TO RESTART --
RIGHT NOW THE MOTHER SUPERIOR HAS THE POPULACE PANICKED. BUT NO ONE WANTS A WAR, NOT REALLY.
THE PEOPLE JUST WANT TO FEEL SAFE...AND BELIEVE THAT THEIR GOVERNMENT IS BEHIND THEM.
YOU WILL NOT MAKE ANYONE SAFER BY GIVING IN TO FEAR. FEAR LED US INTO THE FIRST WAR AND INTO THE ARMS OF THE CUMAEA.
FEAR IS THE REASON THAT ARCANIC CHILDREN ARE BEING DISSECTED BY THE THOUSANDS IN CHAPTERHOUSES ALL ACROSS THE FEDERATION.
WHO CARES ABOUT *THEIR* SAFETY?
YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND HOW DANGEROUS SHE IS, YOUR EXCELLENCY. SHE'S RUTHLESS ENOUGH TO MURDER HER OWN PEOPLE... SHE'S TURNED THE CUMAEA INTO A CULT, THEY'RE AMASSING LILIUM.
IF THE PUBLIC COULD SEE THOSE IMAGES OF THE EXPERIMENTS...
I'LL TAKE WHAT YOU'VE SAID UNDER CONSIDERATION. UNFORTUNATELY I HAVE ANOTHER APPOINTMENT.
ADMIRAL, IF YOU WILL.

I READ YOUR REPORT. THE PICTURE YOU PAINT IS TROUBLING.
WE BELIEVE THE MOTHER SUPERIOR IS PLOTTING TO SEIZE CONTROL OF THE FEDERATION, ADMIRAL BRITO.
LET US JUST SAY, THERE IS MORE WORK YET TO BE DONE.

WE'VE RECEIVED A BELOW-BOARD COMMUNICATION FROM THE ARCANIC COURTS. THEY WISH TO REOPEN NEGOTIATIONS IN THE HOPES OF NORMALIZING RELATIONS BETWEEN OUR NATIONS. NO ONE KNOWS OF THIS BUT ME, THE PRIME MINISTER, AND A HANDFUL OF TRUSTED ASSOCIATES.
I THINK YOU AND RESAK SHOULD ATTEND THESE NEGOTIATIONS.

FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
INTELLIGENCE GATHERING.
THERE ARE OTHERS LESS LIKELY TO BE NOTICED.
BUT LADY ATENA HAS THE VOICE, AND YOU -- THOUGH A MERE ARCANIC BASTARD -- WERE THE FORMER COMMANDER OF AN ELITE HARPOON SQUADRON.
YOU'RE ALSO BOTH TIED TO THE OLDEST NAVAL FAMILY IN THE FEDERATION. YOUR PERSPECTIVES ARE UNIQUE. AND MOST OF ALL YOU ARE LOYAL.

I CAN'T JUST DISAPPEAR. AFTER ZAMORA, THE MOTHER SUPERIOR WILL BE WATCHING ME CLOSELY. AND THEN THERE'S MY OTHER DUTIES --
LEAVE THE MOTHER SUPERIOR TO US.

I WILL NOT PRETEND TO BE A SLAVE AGAIN. NOT FOR ANY REASON.
I DID NOT EXPECT YOU TO DO SO.
THE TRAIN WILL STOP IN HALF AN HOUR. TRANSPORT WILL BE WAITING, ALONG WITH NEW CLOTHING, IDENTITY CARDS, AND MONEY. YOU'LL RECEIVE FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS AT THAT TIME.

THEY HAVE ACCEPTED?
OF COURSE THEY HAVE. THEY'RE IDEALISTIC.
HMMM. THERE'S A YOUNG WOMAN WHO KEEPS BEING MENTIONED IN THE REPORTS ABOUT ZAMORA.
ACCORDING TO OUR AGENTS, THE MOTHER SUPERIOR SEEMED SINGULARLY OBSESSED WITH HER.
DO WE KNOW WHO SHE IS?
NOT YET.
WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF TIME, PRIME MINISTER.
THE NAVY IS STILL LOYAL TO YOU, BUT THE ARMY WILL MOVE INTO THE BORDERLANDS. THE GENERALS ARE SPOILING FOR A FIGHT. YOU WILL NOT BE ABLE TO STOP THEM.
TRUE.
DEPLOY THE FLEET. FOR THE NEXT SIX MONTHS, I WANT THE NAVY -- AND ITS COMMANDERS AND THEIR IMMEDIATE FAMILIES -- SECURELY AT SEA, AWAY FROM THE BASES.
SAFE FROM ASSASSINS AND SABATOGE?
SAFE FROM THE MOTHER SUPERIOR.
YOU SEE, OLD FRIEND, I CAN THINK DRAMATICALLY, TOO.

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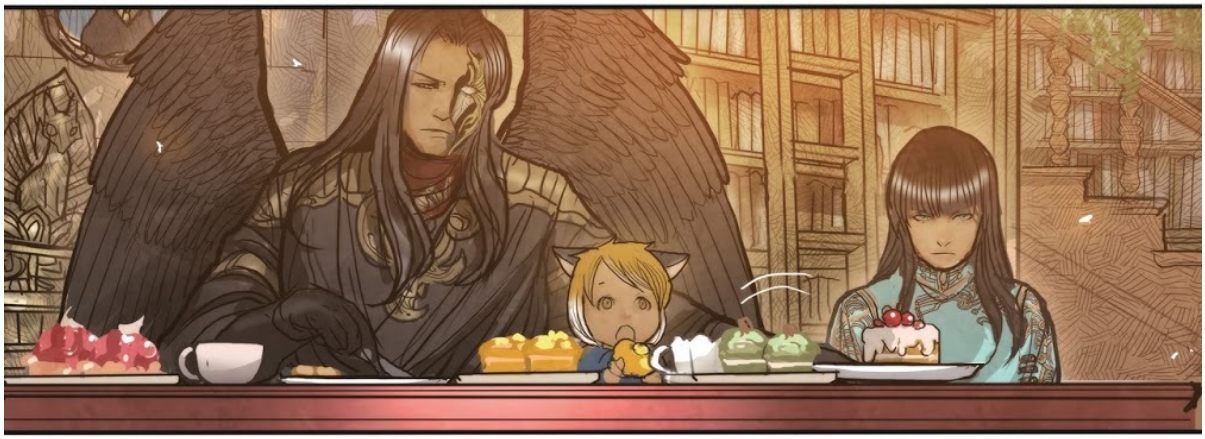

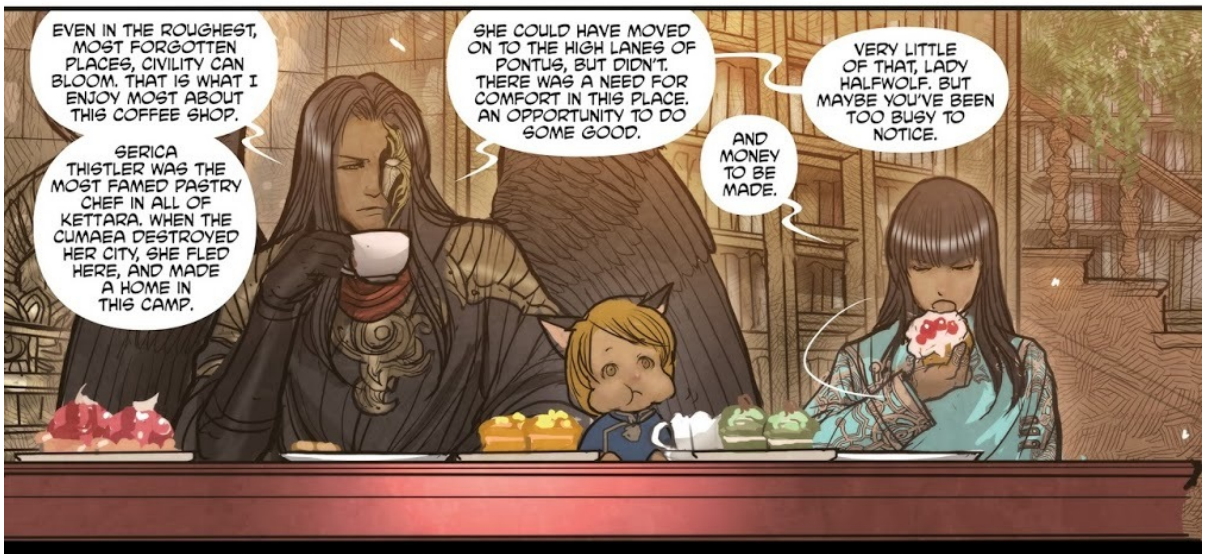
EVEN IN THE ROUGHEST, MOST FORGOTTEN PLACES, CIVILITY CAN BLOOM. THAT IS WHAT I ENJOY MOST ABOUT THIS COFFEE SHOP.
SERICA THISTLER WAS THE MOST FAMED PASTRY CHEF IN ALL OF KETTARA. WHEN THE CUMAEA DESTROYED HER CITY, SHE FLED HERE, AND MADE A HOME IN THIS CAMP.
SHE COULD HAVE MOVED ON TO THE HIGH LANES OF PONTUS, BUT DIDN'T. THERE WAS A NEED FOR COMFORT IN THIS PLACE. AN OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOME GOOD.
AND MONEY TO BE MADE.
VERY LITTLE OF THAT, LADY HALFWOLF. BUT MAYBE YOU'VE BEEN TOO BUSY TO NOTICE.

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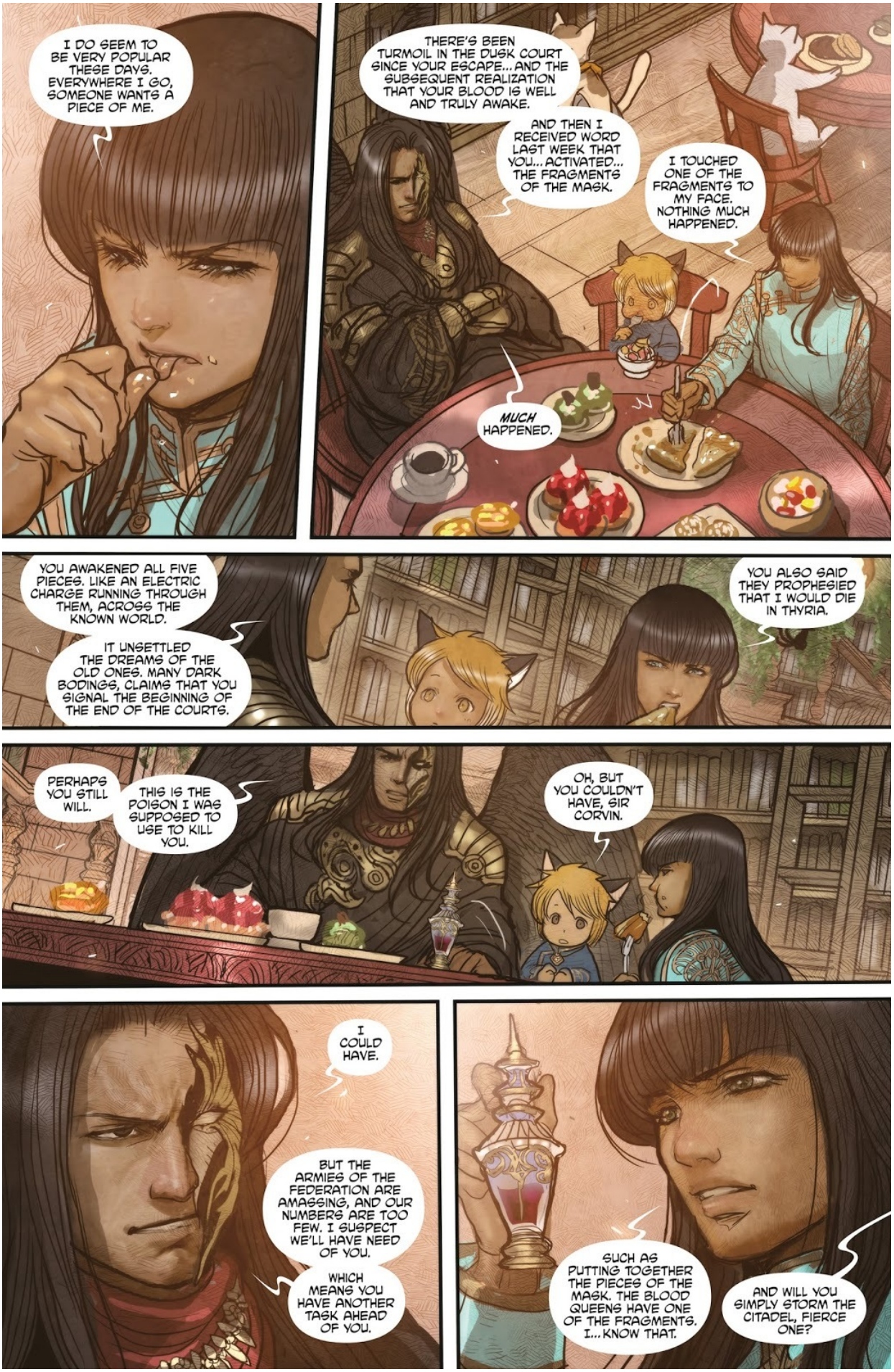
I DO SEEM TO BE VERY POPULAR THESE DAYS. EVERYWHERE I GO, SOMEONE WANTS A PIECE OF ME.
THERE'S BEEN TURMOIL IN THE DUSK COURT SINCE YOUR ESCAPE... AND THE SUBSEQUENT REALIZATION THAT YOUR BLOOD IS WELL AND TRULY AWAKE.
AND THEN I RECEIVED WORD LAST WEEK THAT YOU... ACTIVATED... THE FRAGMENTS OF THE MASK.
I TOUCHED ONE OF THE FRAGMENTS TO MY FACE. NOTHING MUCH HAPPENED.
MUCH HAPPENED.
YOU AWAKENED ALL FIVE PIECES. LIKE AN ELECTRIC CHARGE RUNNING THROUGH THEM, ACROSS THE KNOWN WORLD.
IT UNSETTLED THE DREAMS OF THE OLD ONES. MANY DARK BODINGS, CLAIMS THAT YOU SIGNAL THE BEGINNING OF THE END OF THE COURTS.
YOU ALSO SAID THEY PROPHESIED THAT I WOULD DIE IN THYRIA.
PERHAPS YOU STILL WILL.
THIS IS THE POISON I WAS SUPPOSED TO USE TO KILL YOU.
OH, BUT YOU COULDN'T HAVE, SIR CORVIN.
I COULD HAVE.
BUT THE ARMIES OF THE FEDERATION ARE AMASSING, AND OUR NUMBERS ARE TOO FEW. I SUSPECT WE'LL HAVE NEED OF YOU.
WHICH MEANS YOU HAVE ANOTHER TASK AHEAD OF YOU.
SUCH AS PUTTING TOGETHER THE PIECES OF THE MASK. THE BLOOD QUEENS HAVE ONE OF THE FRAGMENTS. I... KNOW THAT.
AND WILL YOU SIMPLY STORM THE CITADEL, FIERCE ONE?

NO, I THINK NOT.
GOING BACK TO THYRIA MEANS DEATH OR CAPTURE -- FOR YOU, AND THOSE YOU CARE ABOUT. IF THAT WASN'T THE CASE, YOU WOULDN'T BE IN TEAR SHED. YOU WOULD HAVE LEFT ALREADY.

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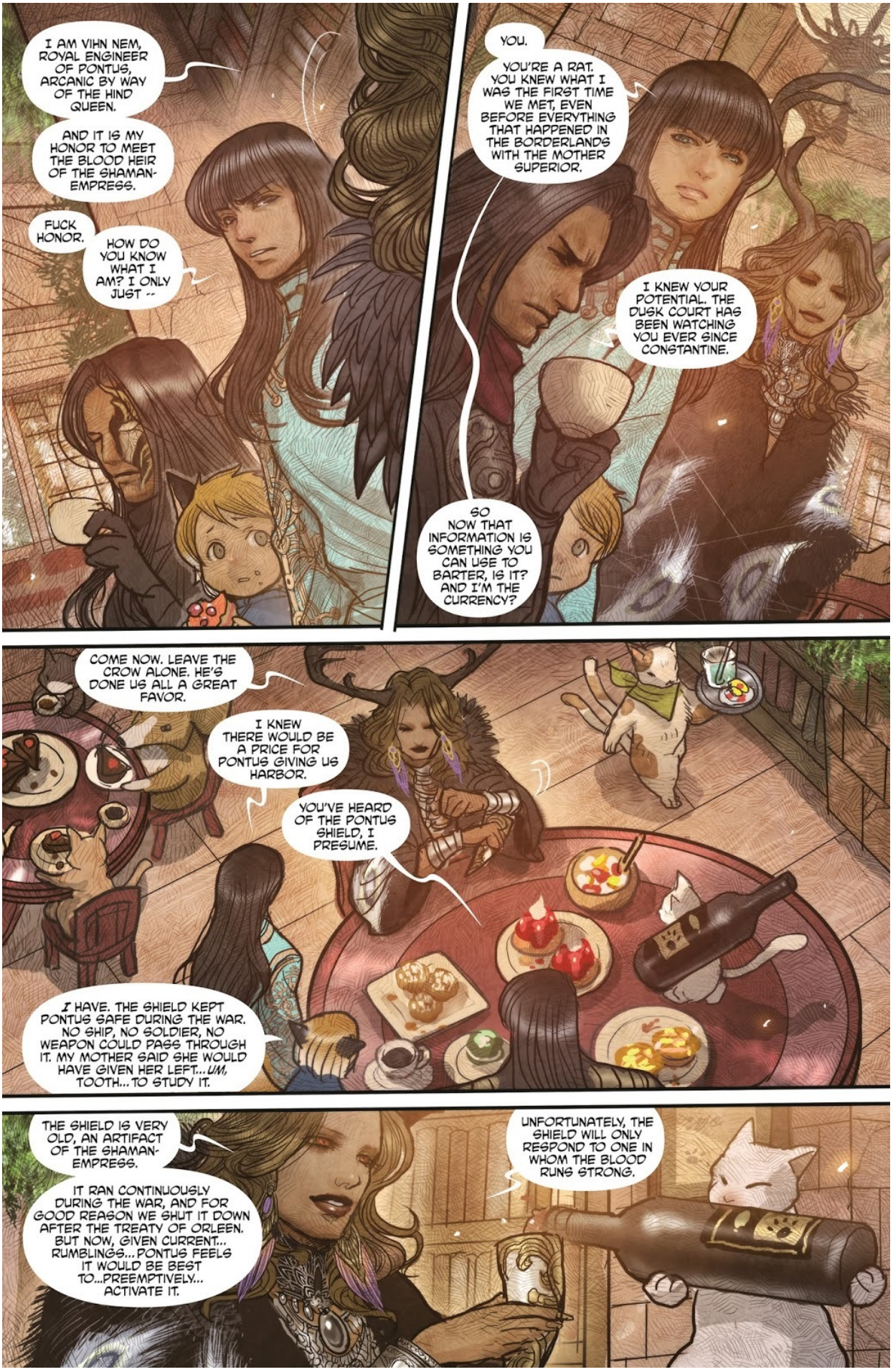
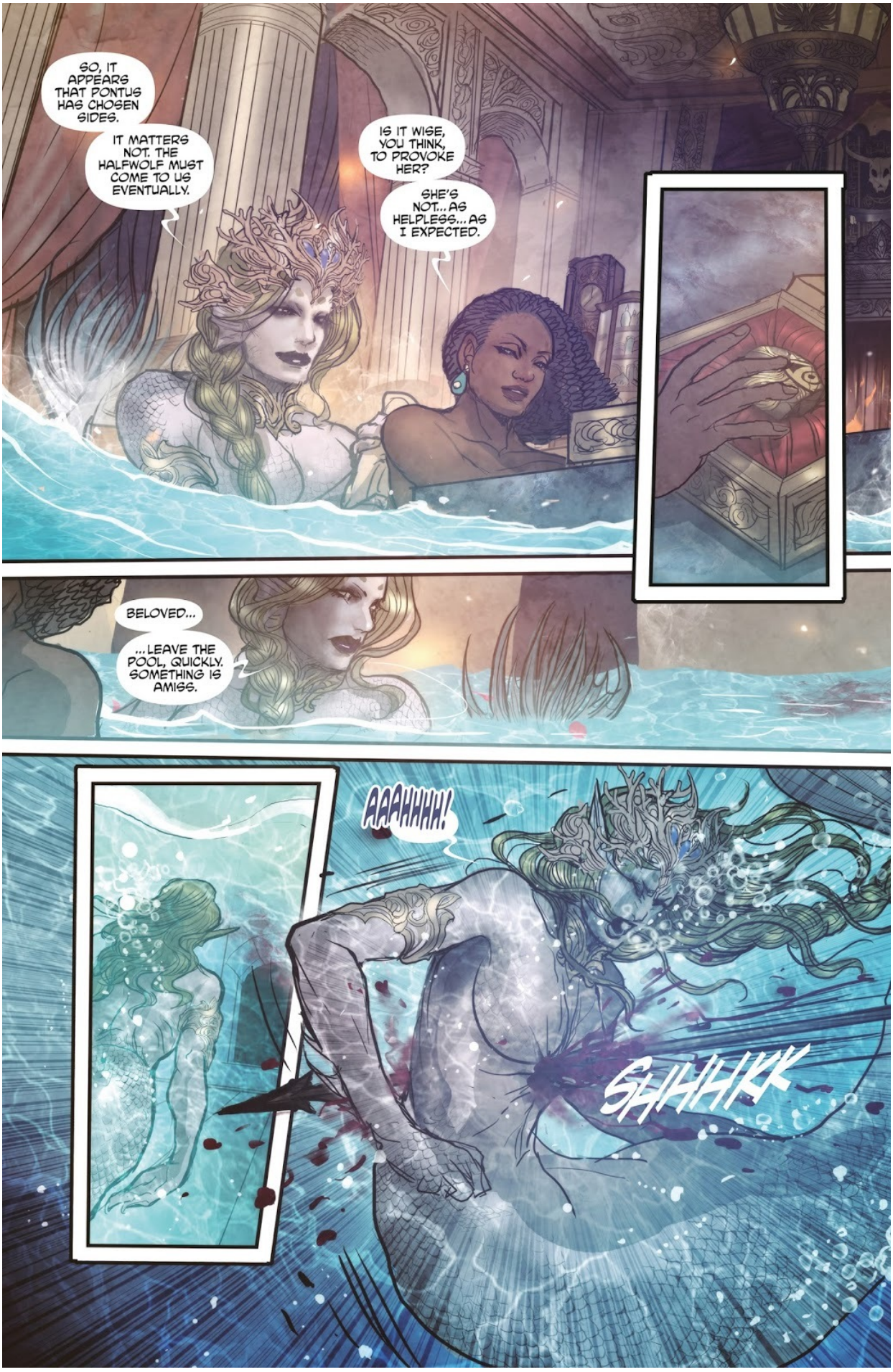

I AM VIHN NEM, ROYAL ENGINEER OF PONTUS, ARCANIC BY WAY OF THE HIND QUEEN.
AND IT IS MY HONOR TO MEET THE BLOOD HEIR OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS.
FUCK HONOR.
HOW DO YOU KNOW WHAT I AM? I ONLY JUST --
YOU.
YOU'RE A RAT. YOU KNEW WHAT I WAS THE FIRST TIME WE MET, EVEN BEFORE EVERYTHING THAT HAPPENED IN THE BORDERLANDS WITH THE MOTHER SUPERIOR.
I KNEW YOUR POTENTIAL. THE DUSK COURT HAS BEEN WATCHING YOU EVER SINCE CONSTANTINE.
SO NOW THAT INFORMATION IS SOMETHING YOU CAN USE TO BARTER, IS IT? AND I'M THE CURRENCY?
COME NOW. LEAVE THE CROW ALONE. HE'S DONE US ALL A GREAT FAVOR.
I KNEW THERE WOULD BE A PRICE FOR PONTUS GIVING US HARBOR.
YOU'VE HEARD OF THE PONTUS SHIELD, I PRESUME.
I HAVE. THE SHIELD KEPT PONTUS SAFE DURING THE WAR. NO SHIP, NO SOLDIER, NO WEAPON COULD PASS THROUGH IT. MY MOTHER SAID SHE WOULD HAVE GIVEN HER LEFT... UM, TOOTH... TO STUDY IT.
THE SHIELD IS VERY OLD, AN ARTIFACT OF THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS.
IT RAN CONTINUOUSLY DURING THE WAR, AND FOR GOOD REASON WE SHUT IT DOWN AFTER THE TREATY OF ORLEEN. BUT NOW, GIVEN CURRENT... RUMBLINGS... PONTUS FEELS IT WOULD BE BEST TO...PREEMPTIVELY... ACTIVATE IT.
UNFORTUNATELY, THE SHIELD WILL ONLY RESPOND TO ONE IN WHOM THE BLOOD RUNS STRONG.

I WAS RECENTLY TOLD THAT MY... FATHER... WAS THE LAST DESCENDANT OF THE SHAMAN EMPRESS.
PERHAPS HE WAS THE LAST TO INHERIT THE EYE. BUT THE SHAMAN-EMPRESS HAD MANY DESCENDANTS.
WHILE THE YEARS MAY HAVE WHITTLED THEIR NUMBERS THERE ARE STILL THOSE WHO CAN CLAIM HER AS AN ANCESTOR.
IN ALMOST ALL OF THEM, HOWEVER, THE BLOOD HAS THINNED TO A DEGREE THAT PREVENTS THEM FROM ACTIVATING HER INVENTIONS.
WHO TURNED ON YOUR SHIELD THE LAST TIME?
OUR SHIELD MASTER... BUT HE'S VERY OLD AND THE PROCESS IS... DEMANDING.
AND YOU THINK I CAN ACTIVATE THIS THING.
I DO. AND IN RETURN, PONTUS WOULD OFFER YOU WHAT YOU CLEARLY SEEK -- PROTECTION, SANCTUARY, SAFETY.
A HOME FOR YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS, LADY HALFWOLF.
A PRISON, YOU MEAN?
PONTUS DOES NOT DOUBLE DEAL. OUR OFFER IS TRUE.
AND WHAT IF I SAY NO?
YOU, THE FOX CHILD, AND THE CAT, WILL IMMEDIATELY BE THROWN OFF TEAR SHED. THE BLOOD QUEENS ARE WAITING FOR YOU BEYOND OUR BORDERS.

I LOVE SHIELDS. IN CASE ANYONE'S INTERESTED.
THAT'S NOT MUCH OF A CHOICE.
IN CASE YOU HAVEN'T NOTICED, HALFWOLF, THERE'S A WAR COMING.
AT TIMES LIKE THESE, CHOICES ARE OFTEN IN SHORT SUPPLY. PONTUS WILL LIVE OR DIE DEPENDING ON WHETHER THEY REPAIR THEIR SHIELD.
WHAT'S IN THIS FOR *YOU*, CROW?
I WISH TO HELP YOU, HELP PONTUS, HELP THE ARCANIC CAUSE.
SO YOU'RE A FUCKING HERO, *EH?*
I WANT TO SEE MY PEOPLE LIVE. DON'T YOU?
GODDESS!
OH, THIS IS LOVELY.
WHAT A MAGNIFICENT SIGHT.

YOUNG FOOL... WE WILL... ACCEPT... THEIR OFFER.
OH, NOW YOU WAKE THE FUCK UP? AND WHEN DID *YOU* DECIDE TO BE ALTRUISTIC?
COMPASSION REQUIRES ITS OWN COURAGE, TO QUOTE THE POETS. ESPECIALLY WHEN ALL OTHERS BELIEVE YOU A FOOL FOR BEING KIND.
FUCK.
THEY'RE REALLY GOING TO KILL ME THIS TIME.


SO, IT APPEARS THAT PONTUS HAS CHOSEN SIDES.
IT MATTERS NOT. THE HALFWOLF MUST COME TO US EVENTUALLY.
IS IT WISE, YOU THINK, TO PROVOKE HER?
SHE'S NOT... AS HELPLESS... AS I EXPECTED.
BELOVED...
...LEAVE THE POOL, QUICKLY. SOMETHING IS AMISS.
AAAHHHH!
SHHHKK

NEEDLE... HAMMER... SECURE THE DOORS.
WE WON'T BE HERE LONG.
TO BE CONTINUED...

An excerpt of a lecture from the esteemed **Professor Tam Tam,** former First Record-Keeper of the Is'hami Temple, and learned contemporary of Namron Black Claw...

It would be a lie to say that the Poets are impartial witnesses to history, though they strive to be exact and sincere, unbiased by resentment and faithful to the truth.

Poets, for all their training and blessings from Ubasti, are still, after all, cats. And cats have been known to tell pleasant lies about ourselves, particularly to outsiders.

Humans and Arcanics, however, are far less willing to record uncomfortable truths, to sit even for a moment with that which is difficult. And so, much is erased – and forgotten.

Consider the fact that the Warlord, Sword of the East, had a twin sister: Moriko Halfwolf, the Blade of Dawn, and the favorite of her mother, the Queen of Wolves.

Another missing fact from the Arcanic histories: both twins were blessed by the Ancestrals, both chosen to command the Arcanic armies as Warlords.

As the eldest, Moriko was the first blessed – and would have made a superior Warlord. She was powerful of mind, impossible to fool, and a ruthless strategist. More vitally, Moriko was favored by their mother.

The younger sister, however, was not without her merits; she was a great warrior, supremely confident, and her hatred of the humans was legendary. She had one other advantage: she looked Arcanic, and tellingly, her older sister did not.

It would be simplistic to argue that the younger sister's appearance alone made her more popular with the people of the Dawn Court. But it would be downright foolish to say it played no part. Moriko might have had the Queen's heart, but her younger sister had their people's.

The Poet assigned to the court, Arkus Furfar, predicted a dire future in which civil war might break out between the sisters and their supporters. But something else happened instead, something strange and unexpected, the sort of contingency for which a Poet must always be prepared.

Moriko, ever the scholar, discovered something in one of the Dawn Court's hidden archives. The Poets never located the precise document, but it changed the trajectory of Moriko's life.

She not only resigned her commission, she abandoned the Dawn Court altogether and began to obsessively search the old ruins of the Shaman-Empress.

The Queen of Wolves held out hope that Moriko might soon return, but her eldest daughter never again set foot in the Dawn Court.

Two years after she absconded, her sister was named Warlord, Sword of the East.

Dear Poets,

It's been a very long break. Maybe too long, but I hope you'll agree that we used the time wisely to bring you another arc filled with Sana's extraordinary art, and a story that brings you deeper into Maika's increasingly perilous quest.

This year, we saw many of you in Seattle, Oakland, Portland, San Diego, New York, Singapore, Lucca…and in those encounters we were humbled and encouraged by your enthusiasm, generosity, and kindness. You came with friends, with family, with children, with your well-read comics and trades. You shared so much with us – about what MONSTRESS has meant to you, how the book has inspired and accompanied you, as people of color, as women of color, as artists, as readers, as the immigrant kid who wants to be an artist in a family that doesn't support them. These conversations and your emails kept us going these past months. You have no idea what your support and your love means to Sana and me.

Hopefully we'll see some of you again real soon. But until then -- welcome back to the Known World and to the saga of Maika Halfwolf.

Love,
Marjorie & Sana

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